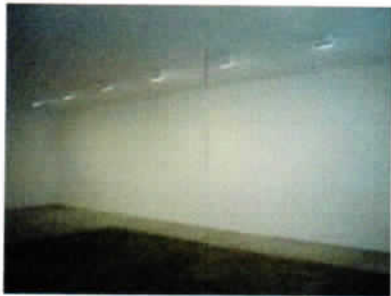


Bones' Beat: The Uncomfortably Great Charles Ray Show at Matthew Marks

By Bones in Bones' Beat, Featured, art

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Charles Ray, a Californian artist who has been active for about 35 years, mostly makes sculptures. Their formidable weight, fragility and cumbersomeness means they don't travel as much as they might, and there have never been many of them--a few a year, perhaps, with long gestation periods before they're completed. Nevertheless, they are often and enthusiastically recalled to explain and illustrate recent art history. Ray makes for a good Google image search: the shots arrest, and may prick a lost memory of a room in a random museum or a perfect spread in an art book. Without fail they'll put a hunger in the belly for more Ray. He'll seduce from the first. His sculptures are engineered and finished with superhuman care, and they tease and prod, ruthlessly, at the fences of human perception. There are three Ray works from 1987-88, marquee years for the artist, now up at Matthew Marks Gallery, and their economy invites a tidy argument for the artist's singular place in the contemporary canon. What a treat.

Ink Line, Moving Wire, and Spinning Spot are the pieces on view in what seems, from various angles, to be an empty gallery. Line is a pencil-thin rod of black ink flowing seamlessly from a hole in the ceiling to a hole in the floor. Wire is an 8.5-foot length of steel wire whose ends stick out of the wall from two tiny holes, one retracting while the other extends. Spot is a 24-inch disc cut into the cement that revolves 33.3 times a minute. They all quietly perform. The line of ink wobbles and gyrates faintly, the only clue that it's moving at all, echoing the reverberations of a musical string. The cement spot spins at the soothing speed that's a panacea to anyone lucky enough to have ever been hypnotized by a record player. The wire sprouts and in-grows like a follicle, or goofily suggests, with the constantly changing but always balanced give and take of the two poking lengths, that an invisible someone inside of the gallery is flying a kite, or driving a sleigh, deep behind Matthew Marks's walls.

Ray's sculptures don't do anything beyond what they purport to do. I zoned out while looking at Spot and saw the moon in the dappled, puckered circle of grey stone, but then the moon went away. And though there is indeed a big-bang reveal to this show at the moment one considers the amount of inventive, invasive masonry and meticulous tuning required to present these discreet, almost presence-free things, that revelation only happens once, and it soon passes. You're left, rather awkwardly, with a deep feeling of inertia. The art all around is keeping busy and will ever keep busy, whirring and dribbling and tugging back and forth. You are standing still, not sure what to do, looking at them.

Ray made Tabletop--a sculpture that was notably revived in curator Paul Schimmel's 'Ecstasy: In and About Altered States' at the LA MOCA in 2005--in 1989, immediately after the three sculptures in the show at Marks. That piece is a pleasant table setting whose circular objects (a plate, a bowl, a glass etc.) rotate imperceptibly. An extrapolation of Spinning Spot into the world of everyday things, Tabletop puts the viewer in a terrifying position, sitting at the table at the precise moment that normal perception gives way and the world starts to unravel.

And Ray strands the viewer there. Bliss is a major theme in contemporary art, but it's not his theme. There are scores of working artists who stretch perceptual reality like taffy for transcendence's sake, whose art makes you woozy and high, and it's great fun and ideal for families inuring children to art experiences. Olafur Eliasson plays with the elements to alert the senses and augment one's relationship with nature, a hippy with a stupendous rig of light and smoke effects. Anish Kapoor's sculptures are usually shiny or fudgy or dusty illusions of infinite space, ancient and eternal in intention, pillowy things you'd love to fall into if they weren't always surrounded by the art world's most highly-strung guards. Pippilotti Rist's giant purple-bathed 360-degree hi-def video environment unwittingly repurposed the MoMA atrium into a crÃ"che for tumbling toddlers last winter. These artists offer escape, nirvana for free if you just look, but they fail to explain why you'd want to go there. Paradise's appeal is taken as a given.

Well, as Townes Van Zandt said, "Heaven ain't bad but you don't get nothing done." I'm with him. Ray forces a viewer to remain uncomfortable. In his work, bliss is both revealed to be easy--as simple as dosing yourself properly, crossing your eyes or standing under the right sort of light--and pointless: Heaven's appeal withers as we grow to miss the questions it let us leave behind. Ultimately, transcendence and tabletops are as mundane as each other, but there's a place halfway between them, Ray's place, where human beings can believe in the journey, and enjoy it as it gets weirder. Standing on perception's threshold takes some getting used to, but no one said enlightenment was going to be easy.

-Bones

Ink Line, Spinning Spot, Moving Wire is up at Matthew Marks' 523 West 24th Street space until the end of June. Unfortunate gallery underlings probably did not realize, when they signed up for work at Marks, that they would have to serve as guards, as they do for this show, so be nice to them when you visit. Ask them what they think of the work, perhaps?